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Keeping Our Minds Strong

A Discussion Paper on Revitalizing Aboriginal Languages in the NWT

Office of the
Languages Commissioner
October 2002

An Elder Speaks

When you speak your language – the land, the culture, the way you pray, your spiritual way – if the elders look at it, it's not separated – it's one thing. For that reason, in speaking about the language, we have to remember those things.

The language we want to keep, and the culture we want to keep – that's not a very small thing. We have to help one another, we have to listen to one another and if we're going to be working on it, we're going to be working on it really strong.

In the past, our elders have been through a lot of difficult times, but they never gave up – they always continued on and now we have a big job to do and it's a big project to work on. As we work on it, we can't give up – we have to keep our minds strong.

Raymond Sonfrere, Dene Cultural Institute, speaking at the Office of the Languages Commissioner Advisory Board Meeting, October 2001

Cover. Madeleine Karkagie, George Pellissey, Gabrielle Etchinelle in Moose Skin Boat. Photo by Norman Simmons

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Message from the Languages Commissioner

When I first came into the Office of the Languages Commissioner, I observed that the Office seemed to work in isolation from the people. It has always been, and is still my belief that the Office of the Languages Commissioner belongs to the people. Questions immediately arose for me, "What do people see as the most important roles for the Office? How can we best serve people in ensuring the spirit of the *NWT Official Languages Act* is upheld?"

The most important task became to find the means of ensuring the Office remains closely connected with the everchanging landscape of language revitalization, more specifically how we keep official languages strong and meaningful in day-to-day life. The first step was the creation of an Advisory Board to the Office of the Languages Commissioner. Board members include Elders and representatives from every official language group. Each Board member has lengthy experience in language work, is fluent in their own language, and has specialized language skills - whether these skills are interpreting, teaching, research, or advisory - and all are highly respected for their work with languages.

As a result of Board creation, there is now the type of contact and resource needed to remove the Office from its isolation and provide the Office and language communities with contacts, relationships with other communities, and dignity to all our work. It has drawn together language workers from all regions to hear how language organizations in their communities support each other and, most importantly, it is a forum for unified work on language revitalization. Only by working together can we gain positive workable results.

In supporting the work of the Special Committee on the review of *NWT Official Languages Act*, Advisory Board meetings allowed us – together as a people – to examine the Act as it exists, come to conclusions about where the Act is good and where it is lacking, and within its complexity, look at how improvements can be made. The review has also raised language issues and questions related to Aboriginal language revitalization throughout the Territories. Many of those questions have come to the Office of the Languages Commissioner. The Office has worked with government departments in providing answers and solutions and in doing so, gained a wider understanding of the dynamics of language programs, impacts and future needs.

Outlined in this paper is a brief history of where we in the Northwest Territories have come in developing language legislation, what has been accomplished and what remains to be done. If the paper informs, stimulates debate, and leads to action it will have accomplished much. At the very least, the Paper should reaffirm that today there is urgency in furthering the cause of Aboriginal language revitalization in the Northwest Territories, and to that end the GNWT must consider how a new institution might be established to further this cause. As well, the Office of the Languages Commissioner needs a bigger vision and must play a more active role.

1 Background

We need to see school textbooks, street signs and maps written in the region's specific language. We need school teachers, employment counsellors, priests and church services, territorial and federal personnel, fluent in a native language. The territorial and federal governments claim to represent the people in the Northwest Territories, yet cannot converse to us in a native language.

Native Women's Association of the NWT presentation to the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages, 1985

1.1 An Historical Perspective

In 1982, the Federal government initiated amendments to the *Northwest Territories Act* with the intent of making French and English official languages of the Northwest Territories. The attempt to legislate English and French as official languages of the NWT created a powerful force to recognize NWT Aboriginal languages in the same manner. Subsequently, in 1984, the *NWT Official Languages Act* was passed, legislating English and French official languages, with Aboriginal languages recognized by regulation.

In 1986, the Government of the Northwest Territories appointed the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages to investigate and make recommendations on how Aboriginal languages in the Northwest Territories could and should be used, developed and promoted. During community hearings, northern citizens reaffirmed language as a cultural worldview, and that Aboriginal languages should be recognized equally with French and English. By 1990, the Act had been amended to give official status to eight languages - Cree, Chipewyan, Dogrib, English, French, Gwich'in, Inuktitut (including Inuinnaqtun and Inuvialuktun) and Slavey (including North Slavey and South Slavey).

Eighteen years have now passed since the NWT *Official Languages Act* came into being, and twelve years since NWT Aboriginal languages achieved official status. Milestones over the period include:

- **Cooperation Agreements:** Since 1984 a number of Federal/Territorial Cooperation Agreements were signed to provide funding for the implementation of French as an official language and for "revitalization, maintenance and enhancement" of Aboriginal languages. The first agreement (1984) provided $16 million over five years to the GNWT. The most recent agreement (1999- 2004) provides $17.5 million including $9.5 million for Aboriginal languages and $8 million for French. To date, almost $97 million has been provided for official language implementation with $59 million specific to Aboriginal languages.

- **NWT Office of the Languages Commissioner:** The Office of the Languages Commissioner was established by the 1990 amendments to the Act. Two years later the first NWT Languages Commissioner was appointed. Since then, there have been two other appointed NWT Language Commissioners. In 2000, the current Languages Commissioner established an Advisory Board to the Office of the Languages Commissioner to provide broad direction and advice on all matters related to language revitalization.

- **Aboriginal Language Teaching and Learning Centres (TLCs):** In 1990, with funding provided through local Education Councils, Aboriginal Language Teaching and Learning Centres (TLCs) were established in all NWT regions, although prior to that time some TLCs operated as Languages Centres (e.g., Gwich'in Language Centre in Fort McPherson). Individually and collectively, the TLCs play a critical role in maintaining and developing Aboriginal languages and culture - primarily by working with Elders in providing teaching materials and supporting Aboriginal language teachers. Of all NWT institutions created specifically for Aboriginal language revitalization, the TLCs have the earliest beginnings and the most sustained level of production.

  Funding, staffing, management and direction are on-going issues for the TLCs – with some having to close for lengthy periods of time. There are now only five TLCs in operation – Dogrib, Gwich'in, Inuinnaqtun/Inuvialuktun, North Slavey and South Slavey.

Gwich'in Elder

"The language we want to keep, and the culture we want to keep – that's not a very small thing."

Raymond Sonfrere,
Dene Cultural Institute

- **GNWT Support:** Within the GNWT, support for Aboriginal language issues has been passed from one organization to another. In 1984, with the signing of the first Cooperation Agreement, responsibility for language issues and initiatives was assigned to the Department of Culture and Communications. In 1991, Culture and Communications merged with the Department of Education to become the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE). In 1993, the mandate for overseeing official language implementation was transferred to the newly created Official Languages Unit of the Department of Executive. In 1994, with a staff of Official Languages Policy Officers, and Advisors for Official Languages – aided by Language Coordinators designated within each of the other departments - government support for language issues was probably at a peak. Finally, in 1997, the Department of Executive discontinued their Official Languages Unit, and ECE again assumed responsibility for language issues and initiatives.

- **Language Communities:** In the mid-1990s, during extensive consultation with communities, people told ECE that communities – not government – should set priorities for language activities and communities should have greater responsibility and control over language activities. Responding to this advice, the ECE devolved some responsibility for Aboriginal language revitalization to 'language communities' and committed funds for developing and implementing community-based strategies. Today there are seven language communities representing the seven official languages spoken in the Northwest Territories.

- **Dene Language Bureau:** In 1997, after 25 years of operation, the Dene Language Bureau with its origins in the GNWT Interpreter Corps, was closed. Some may justify the closure of the Language Bureau on demand and cost, but symbolically, closure was a huge blow to language revitalization efforts in the Northwest Territories. Language Bureau closure meant losing a highly visible and highly respected institution with major impact. For example, up to that time, the Language Bureau provided valuable terminology development in workshops with Elders, linguists, interpreters and translators resulting in standard terminology for areas of need including: education, health, justice and transportation. Further, the Language Bureau published new and confirmed terminology on a regular basis in the newsletter Dene Y'ati, all of which halted. Instead, individual GNWT departments were given responsibility for terminology development - and without a publication instrument such as Dene Y'ati, circulation of information was left to individual departments, an action that became sporadic at best. Closure also meant a blow to training, maintaining standards and keeping a valuable interpreter corps with years of experience together.

"An Elder was once asked, why is our language so important? And he replied, what if you woke up one morning and you saw on the branch of a tree a robin and it was singing the song of the sea gull? How would you feel? You probably would feel that in the Creator's law something has gone wrong and it is in this way that it is not meant for us to lose our language."

Andy Norwegian,
Deh Cho Teaching and Learning Centre,
Fort Simpson

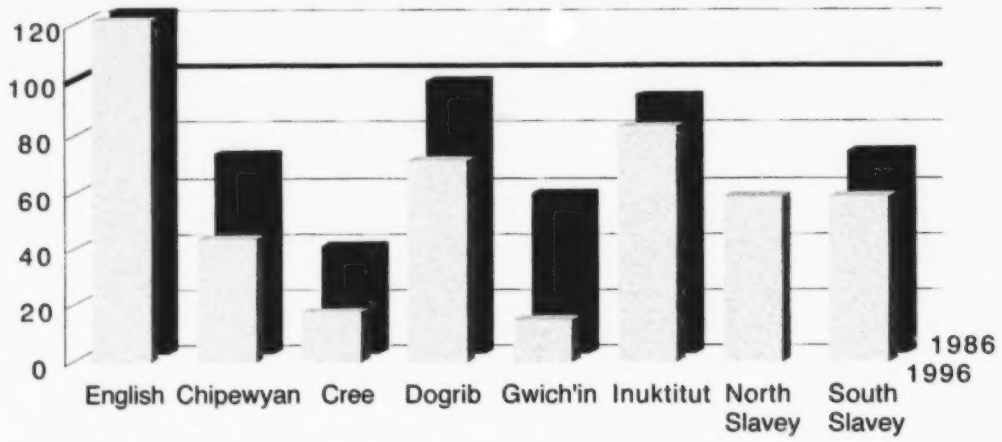
- **Review of the Official Languages Act:** In 2000, the NWT Legislative Assembly struck a Special Committee for the Review of the Official Languages Act. The review – to be undertaken over two years – is looking at progress towards achieving the Act's goals including an examination of the administration and implementation of the Act. Recommendations for changes to the Act are expected as part of the Committee's report to the Legislative Assembly in the spring of 2003.

1.2 Language Shift - One Performance Measurement Indicator

Using any measures of success, it may seem that we have accomplished much. But have we made any progress in revitalizing the use of our Aboriginal languages? Indications are that our successes have not been enough to effectively reverse language loss.

Linguists often use *language shift* to determine the health of a language. It is a measure of the relationship between mother tongue and the actual language used at home. If for every 100 people whose first language is Dogrib only 72 still speak it in their homes, the language shift is 72%. A percentage less than 100 means that people are shifting away from a language. Language shift is a serious problem because a language that is no longer spoken at home cannot be handed down to the younger generation. A report prepared for the NWT Literacy Council in 1999, using Census data, presented some distressing examples of language shift in the NWT prior to division[1].

Language Shift in the NWT



First of all, English is the only language that has continued to gain new speakers. In both 1986 and 1996, for every 100 people who learned English as their mother tongue, there were 122 people using English as the main language at home: the language shift was upwards. In contrast, all of the Aboriginal languages had fewer at-home speakers than the number who learned an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue: the language shift was downwards. For example, language shift in Dogrib was 97% in 1986, but declined to 72% in 1996. For Cree and Gwich'in, decline in usage was even more severe. It should be noted the NWT Bureau of Statistics cautions that Census language data, although of some value, has inherent flaws. For example, samples may vary from census to census, and can be small. So we must not take this language shift data at face value. **But even so, trends are clear: despite all the good intentions and money spent on language revitalization, NWT Aboriginal people are increasingly losing their languages.**

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[1] Crosscurrent Associates. *Languages of the Land: A Resource Manual for Language Activists*. Yellowknife: NWT Literary Council, 1999; p. 13.

2 Different Players

> *One of the things that we've always talked about is that our language is our language. It is up to us to determine what it is going to be. We can't have people out there telling us "This is what we think your language should be." I think the people themselves have to say, "This is what our language is to us".*
>
> Fibbie Tatti, speaking at the Office of the Languages Commissioner Advisory Board Meeting, October 2001

There are many organizations in the Northwest Territories with Aboriginal language revitalization roles and responsibilities. It is worthwhile to have a look at these organizations and consider what they do.

2.1 ECE

The GNWT Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) has a very broad mandate with regard to Aboriginal language revitalization. This mandate covers a wide age spectrum including early childhood, school programs, adult literacy, and family and community programs. To meet its mandate, ECE has no specific, core organization dedicated to Aboriginal language revitalization. Rather all Department divisions are obligated to develop and deliver their own specific programs and services in support of Aboriginal language revitalization. These initiatives are in addition to ECE's other and considerable roles and responsibilities with education, culture and employment. The more important ECE Aboriginal language revitalization initiatives that ECE is mandated to provide include; Aboriginal Language Curriculum development and evaluation; Aboriginal Language Literacy Strategy; Early Childhood Education (Language Nests); Aboriginal Language and Cultural Instructor Training Program; Interpreter and Language Training and Certification; Community Language Planning; funding other GNWT Department Official Language programs and services, e.g. Health and Social Service; terminology workshops; and some CBC Aboriginal broadcasting.

2.2 Language Communities

Using government funding, each of the seven Language Communities have developed language plans and are currently in the process of implementing their plans. The range of activities Language Communities provide include; policies and organization that support language retention within the broad community of home, school, Aboriginal organization and community; greater awareness and appreciation of the value of language and culture; expanded use of language and culture through public information, research, training, school and community-based programs; interpretation, translation and certification services; language terminology and genealogy research; and increased use of Aboriginal languages, particularly among children.

2.3 Divisional Education Boards & Councils

The student population of the NWT is linguistically diverse with eleven official languages used across the territories.

In the early 1980s, the Legislative Assembly's Special Committee on Education established eight divisional boards of education and two boards of education in Yellowknife representing the public and separate school systems. Some have since become councils. The boards and councils are responsible for the administering program delivery in their respective regions.

2.4 Early Childhood Education

ECE oversees the early childhood learning system which links early identification of student support needs to curriculum development to provide a continuum approach to childhood development. Early Childhood and School Services (EC & SS), as it is known within the department, is also responsible for administering the Healthy Children Initiative and developing the programs necessary to address the range of student support services required. As well, this department plays an integral role in developing curricula for NWT Schools.

2.5 Aboriginal Head Start

Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) is a preschool program funded by Health Canada for First Nations, Inuit and Metis children and their families living in urban centres and large northern communities. Aboriginal Head Start centres in the Northwest Territories provide comprehensive experiences that prepare Dene, Metis and Inuit preschoolers between 3-5 years of age for their school years by meeting their spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical needs. Aboriginal children have distinct cultures and languages, values and histories.

Each centre strives to revitalize Aboriginal culture and language. The centres are administered locally by non-profit Aboriginal organizations, involving parents and the community in the management and operation of the program. Elders play a strong role too as they are invited throughout the year to teach preschoolers about traditional skills.

2.6 Prince of Wales Museum

Culture, Heritage and Language of ECE administers museum, archives and archaeology programs at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, and is responsible for supporting culture, heritage and language initiatives throughout the NWT.

2.7 Teaching and Learning Centres

The five TLCs - Dogrib, Gwich'in, Inuinnaqtun/Inuvialuktun, North Slavey and South Slavey - provide Aboriginal Language school program support including; research and materials production; promoting Aboriginal language use; conducting adult literacy classes; delivering Aurora College teaching courses; and sitting on important Boards such as ECEs Dene Subject Advisory Committee and Office of the Languages Commissioner Advisory Board.

2.8 The NWT Literacy Council

The NWT Literacy Council supports development of literacy in all NWT official languages. In meeting its mandate, the Council promotes reading and writing in all NWT official languages; provides information about literacy programs and resources; develops teaching, learning and promotional materials; supports literacy programs, projects and practitioners; monitors and responds to territorial and federal literacy initiatives and policies; and encourages reading and writing at all ages.

2.9 Dene Cultural Institute (DCI)

DCI provides NWT schools with traditional knowledge gathered through research, methods in which traditional knowledge can be incorporated into school curricula, and teacher resource materials.

2.10 NWT Languages Commissioner

The primary role and responsibility of the NWT Languages Commissioner is to ensure recognition of the rights, status and privileges of all official languages, as well as compliance – on the part of GNWT departments and agencies – with the spirit and intent of the *Official Languages Act*. In meeting its role and responsibility, the Languages Commissioner has the power to initiate investigations; produce findings with recommendations for action; and, where departments fail to act, report to the Legislative Assembly with a request for action. The Languages Commissioner must submit an annual report to the Legislative Assembly on Office activities including recommendations for proposed changes to the Act which might be necessary or desirable to uphold the spirit and intent of the Act.

"This about our language, I am very, very happy. Try your best. Try hard. We will talk our language and they will listen."

Mrs. Jane Charlie, Gwich'in Elder, Fort McPherson

Observations

There are two important observations that can be made about the different agencies and organizations working in the field of NWT Aboriginal language revitalization. First, there is no one organization with overall responsibility for planning, coordination and evaluation. Instead, each organization is left to develop its own programs and services and measure its own results. The bottom line is there is no overall language plan for NWT Aboriginal language revitalization or system of accountability that all organizations follow. At best, accountability is haphazard. Indeed, we are not tracking how organization delivered programs and services are affecting 'language shift'.

Second, there is duplication and inefficiency in the current system. As shown in Table 1, virtually every element of Aboriginal language revitalization - whether it be research, policy development, program development, materials development, program delivery, monitoring, and especially planning, advocacy and promotion - has more than one responsible organization. The extent that each organization contributes to language revitalization remains unknown. There is no organization tasked with overall coordination. In other words, it is like a feast where everyone brings rice pudding because no one is coordinating an overall menu.

Roles and Responsibilities

	Education Culture and Employment	Community Language Planning	Board of Educations (Councils)	Early Childhood Education	Aboriginal Headstart	Prince of Wales Museum
Planning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Research	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Policy Development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Program Development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Materials Development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Program Delivery	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Language Services	✓	✓	✓			✓
Advocacy and Promotion	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Monitoring	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

For example, within ECE - the organization with the most resources and assigned responsibilities for Aboriginal Language development - there is no overall coordination. One reason is that three divisions and four sub-divisions have different responsibilities for Aboriginal Language development - see Chart below. Likewise there is no overall monitoring and evaluation. For example, is Dene Kede truly being implemented in the schools? The Dene Kede Curriculum - developed in 1996 - has never been evaluated or monitored on its implementation, so no one can say with authority whether the curriculum is effective in meeting objectives and/or needs additional supporting staff, training, and materials.

ECE **Aboriginal Language Development**

Division	*Subdivision*	*Responsibilities*
Policy and Planning		Education Act, strategic planning, results reporting, human resource management
Advanced Education and Careers	College and Career Development	• Aurora College to deliver Teacher Education Program • Interpreter/Translator training • Literacy organizations.
Education and Culture	Early Childhood / School Services	• Dene Kede K-6 Curriculum • Dene Kede 7-9 Curriculum • Innuqatigiit Curriculum • Early Childhood Program (language nests) • Healthy Children Initiative • Aboriginal Headstart
	Education Operations and Development	• Support, monitoring and review of District Education Council bodies in delivery of K-12 education programs • Aboriginal Language Teacher Certification • Professional Improvement
	Culture Heritage and Languages	• Territorial Museum, NWT Archives, archaeology, geographic names, education extension programs • Support for Arts Council and community culture and heritage organizations • Northern Performers
	Language Services	• French translation services • Working with Aboriginal language communities to develop programs to support acquisition and maintenance of Aboriginal languages • Implementation of strategic language plans • Support to Community Broadcasting • Hospital – Language Services

3 Issues & Recommendations

For the last two years for the young people I teach in the school an hour at a time – just an hour at a time that I talk to the children. I talk to them in my own language. I sit amongst them and with their teachers and the teacher would interpret for me. Now I'm really happy and grateful about the Dene language and everything here is beginning to come together even in the schools – the people can talk to the children in the school – I think things like that can happen.

Adele Hardisty, Deh Cho Elder, Wrigley

There are many issues that confront Aboriginal language revitalization in the Northwest Territories. It is important that we understand these issues, since they give us the seeds for developing new plans and improved programs and services. In this section, we discuss these issues and recommend actions that should be taken.

3.1 The NWT Lacks An Effective Language Plan

Professor Joshua Fishman[2], based on his study of minority languages worldwide, postulates a continuum of eight stages of language loss. At Level 1, the highest level, language is used in higher education, day to day work and national media. At the other extreme, Level 8, there are only a few older people who speak the language; they are isolated from each other and the language is almost extinct.

At Level 6, the main challenge is to promote greater use of the Aboriginal language in the family and community – primarily to re-establish intergenerational transmission with the help of elders who are fluent speakers and those who understand the language but do not speak it. At Level 6 these initiatives require those who do not speak the language to appreciate the usefulness - indeed the necessity - of speaking their Aboriginal languages. If this promotion is successful, children's language is restored and families, individuals, parents, grandparents and children increasingly use the language in everyday life. Stage 6 promotion can revitalize an Aboriginal language.
Most Northwest Territories Aboriginal languages likely range from levels 6-8 in the Fishman Model. What is lacking is a Language Plan that: 1) confirms where each Aboriginal language operates in the model; 2) outlines specific programs and services that address language revitalization needs 3) confirms resources required to reverse language shift - those

[2] Dr. Joshua A. Fishman, is an international leader in the fields of sociolinguistics and bilingual education. Professor Fishman is considered the founder of sociolinguistics and dedicated advocate of mother tongue use the world over. His most recent books are The Handbook of Language and Ethnicity (2000), Can Threatened Language be Saved? (2001) and Reversing Language Shift (1991)

languages at lower levels would require more resources and; 4) identifies performance measurement indicators that track efforts to reverse language shift. Currently there are Community Language Plans, but these plans are tailored to the resources available, not vice versa.

Recommendation 1

Each Aboriginal language should have a Language Plan. A Language Plan should include a commitment of GNWT resources required to reverse Language Shift and address many long outstanding issues such as the need for I/T training, certification and employment opportunities.

3.2 There is No Mechanism for Coordination and Cooperation

With so many departments and organizations involved in Aboriginal language revitalization – each with different objectives and agendas – it is not surprising there are overlaps in delivered programs and services and serious gaps – such as not having in place an evaluation system that tracks delivered programs and services against language shift. With improved inter-organizational coordination and cooperation, however, there would be opportunity for reducing duplication and addressing serious gaps. For example, organizations would have the opportunity of using scarce resources to cost-share policy frameworks, research terminology and promote the value and importance of language and culture. But a mechanism for coordinating these types of efforts must first be created. As Philip Rabesca, Chair of the Dogrib Language Community Committee, commented at the most recent Advisory Board meeting, *"it would be beneficial for language communities to work together on areas of common interest, although there is no mechanism in place for coordination and cooperation except for language community meetings sponsored by ECE where the agenda is basically an ECE agenda".*

Recommendation 2

A 'Cultural and Language Secretariat' should be established with the lead responsibility for Language Revitalization planning, coordination and program/ service delivery. Such an institution could be established by culling program and service resources from other departments where Language Revitalization programs and services are lost within the main focus of the department.

One of the main problems facing Aboriginal languages in the Northwest Territories is the lack of coordination of resources and activities within and among language communities. The extent of this problem varies among the different language communities. From a strategic perspective, it is imperative that language communities collectively manage and coordinate the limited resources they have toward the common goal of language retention and revival.

From Languages of the Land: A Resource Manual for Language Activists, *a report prepared for the NWT Literary Council in 1999.*

The overall aim of the new Secretariat would be to make better use of limited resources through effective planning, focused delivery, and inter-agency coordination – rooted in a close working relationship with communities. Part of its duties would be to find ways and means of developing and maintaining working relationships with language groups in other jurisdictions should be considered, for example, Gwich'in in Yukon and Alaska, Cree in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba; and Inuvialuktun, Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun in Nunavut.

A secretariat is usually created when there is an issue or area of programs that are high profile and Cabinet wants to place the issue at the forefront of the political agenda. What an opportunity this would be for Official Languages to have such a high profile.

By creating an Official Languages Secretariat, the government can prevent the issue of language being lost in departments that are responsible for other programs.

3.3 The Act Lacks An Aboriginal Perspective & definition of Official NWT 'Language'

Language Commission Advisory Board members say there is no Aboriginal perspective to the *Official Languages Act*. They cite three examples; 1) the Act is written and published in English and French but not the nine Aboriginal languages; 2) the Act groups languages together - North and South Slavey; and Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun and Inuinnaqtun - without due regard to the important cultural and linguistic differences between groups; and 3) the Act does not enshrine important institutions such as a Culture and Language Secretariat. A revised Act should have an aboriginal perspective.

Recommendation 3
NWT Aboriginal persons who speak their language and who understand and respect the Aboriginal perspective should be involved in the redrafting of the Official Languages Act.

Advisory Board members say under the Act, English and French are accorded much higher status over official Aboriginal languages. Again they cite three examples: 1) Legislative Assembly presentations can be made in either English or French but with Aboriginal languages on an 'as needed basis' – a term which is not defined; 2) all NWT Acts and journals must be printed in both English and French but not in the Aboriginal official languages unless directed by the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories; and 3) Government interpreter service is mandatory for English and French but only in the Aboriginal official languages if there is "significant demand" or because of the "nature of the office" - yet, both requirements are undefined.

Recommendation 4
A revised Act should enhance and expand the legal status of all official NWT Aboriginal languages.

Although the Act designates Chipewyan, Cree, Dogrib, English, French, Gwich'in, Inuktitut (including Inuinnaqtun and Inuvialuit) and Slavey (including North Slavey and South Slavey) as official languages, the Act does not provide a definition for language nor criteria for official language status. Some say it is too difficult to define language, concluding that if common language names apply, people themselves can decide if they speak an official language. Others say if language is defined too narrowly, dialects that should be included will be overlooked.

Advisory Board members say standardized criteria should be established for determining the recognition for official Aboriginal language status in the NWT. The criteria should be based on languages that originated and grew out of a life lived on the land. In other words, the land created a place for language. As such, members say language criteria selected must reflect that each Aboriginal language lies within specific geographic areas whose boundaries reflect pre-contact, and the traditional, economic, linguistic and cultural practices of each group. For this reason, South Slavey, North Slavey, Inuinnaqtun and Inuvialuktun should be designated official languages.

Recommendation 5
The NWT Official Languages Act should include criteria for determining which Aboriginal languages qualify as official Aboriginal Languages in the NWT. These criteria should be based on the recognition that aboriginal languages originated and grew out of a life lived on the land. Language criteria must reflect that each Aboriginal language lies within specific geographic areas whose boundaries reflect pre-contact, and the traditional, economic, linguistic and cultural practices of each group.

Recommendation 6
All official Aboriginal languages currently recognized in the Official Languages Act should be scrutinized against these criteria.

Recommendation 7
Based on this criteria, South Slavey, North Slavey, Inuinnaqtun and Inuvialuktun should be designated as official Aboriginal languages in an amended Official Languages Act.

3.4 There Is No GNWT Obligation to Provide Language Services in Official Aboriginal Languages

The words 'language rights' should mean there is a legal obligation to provide government services in the official languages.

However, past experience shows that in our system, interpreting services have not been readily available in the official Aboriginal languages. Advisory Board members cite four examples; 1) use of official languages in the Legislative Assembly; 2) printing of government documents; 3) language rights in courts; and 4) government delivered services.

Under the current construct of the *Official Languages Act,* a person or group has to show significant demand or the important nature of the office, in order to establish the need for the service. In all cases, the onus for obtaining interpreting/translation services rests with the individual or group. Here the individual/group must be aware of their language rights, then they must request language service and finally show significant demand or important nature of the office. Within these restrictions, government departments are not obliged to offer efficient or effective language services, including situations where effective communication is critical. Examples include: courts, policing, transportation centres, airline safety, education and health.

"I remember going to Air Tindi and one Elder from Rae Lakes, he just happened to be sitting there. He said, 'My ticket is at the counter to go back to Rae Lakes, but they do not understand me. The plane left already and I am stuck and I have no money.' The government should provide at least some interpreters/translators at the airport and wherever needed."

Jonas Lafferty.

Recommendation 8

The NWT Official Languages Act should define more expansively, based on need, the circumstances in which government has a legal obligation to use official Aboriginal languages, including directing government departments to provide high quality language service in the official Aboriginal languages, beyond the current limits of significant demand or nature of the office. The client should not be required to prove the need for a service in their Aboriginal language.

3.5 The ACT Should Provide For Teacher and I/T Training, and Highlight Research and Accuracy of Terminology

Aurora College's recent I/T needs assessment indicated a strong need for interpreter/translators, especially in the fields of Health and Justice. However, Aurora College officials advised there was very low response to a call for students to take available I/T courses. Aurora officials say low interest can be directly attributed to lack of I/T employment opportunities. This was corroborated by interviews with Health officials who advised they have high need for I/Ts but insufficient funds to hire additional fulltime I/Ts.

The root problem is that I/T employment opportunities are limited. If employment opportunities are limited, why should a community language worker seek training? Ultimately, this means that available I/T services are minimal at best.

Further, unlike their French counterparts whose training is recognized through certification, Aboriginal language interpreters cannot command as high a rate of pay. It should be noted that in a recent ECE strategy document titled '*Revitalizing, Enhancing and Promoting Aboriginal Languages*', the Department commits itself to developing I/T certification standards under the *Apprenticeship, Trades and Occupational Certification Act*. However,

the second part of the Strategy – development of language standards – refers I/T certification "to various language communities for development". Such an approach would take years to complete, and result in a different 'standard' for each language - yet standardization across languages has always been accepted as a cohesive force for Aboriginal language revitalization.

Recommendation 9
The Official Languages Act should provide for official language teacher training (including daycare and pre-school teachers) and interpreter/translator (I/T) training. Further, the Act should set high standards regarding accurate interpreting and translation and highlight the importance of language research and government department use of technical terminology.

It is noteworthy that eight of ten complaints received by the Office of the Languages Commissioner are related to the lack of interpreting and translation services.

3.6 The Office of the Languages Commissioner: Expanded Role and Responsibilities

> *Our ancestors are gone but they have made sure that we have retained many of their values. So, we feel very fortunate for that. There are many beautiful things that parents have passed on to their children and we become a very big person by it - we become a valuable person.*
>
> *If we want to look at what our ancestors have done, the only thing we can see today is where they have travelled, where they have camped before. We see the rocks that they have left behind which were used for fishing. Those are the things that are visible, but what they have given us for our own knowledge is in us. It seems like they have given a great deal of things for us to carry on in our lives.*
>
> *Today, all of us who are here in this meeting, each one of us possesses beautiful, valuable information from our parents. That is one of the reasons we are here together. ... Because we listen to our parents and we have retained their information, we are here. We may not be very strong as one, but we are powerful as a group. We will be very powerful when we work together.*
>
> Elizabeth Mackenzie, Dogrib Elder, Fort Rae speaking at the Office of the Languages Commissioner Advisory Board Meeting, October 2001

To do positive things for language and culture…that is what we expect. To do positive things for language and culture goes right to the meaning of the "spirit and intent" of the *Official Languages Act*.

But is it sufficient that our Aboriginal languages have official status recognized in law? What does this really mean? The fact that the *Official Languages Act* itself is only available in

English and French speaks volumes about the true 'status' of NWT Aboriginal languages. But if all of our laws were translated into Dogrib or Inuvialuktun, would that make a difference? Sixteen years ago, the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages said it was less important to have translated laws than it was to have our Aboriginal languages used in the communities and regions[3]. Today, this view has not changed.

As already noted, the primary role of the Languages Commissioner is to ensure that government institutions recognize the rights, status and privileges of each of the Official Languages, and comply with the spirit and intent of the *Official Languages Act*.

This essentially passive, watchdog role falls far short of what the 1986 Task Force on Aboriginal Languages recommended. In their report, the Task Force proposed a much more active role for two (one for Dene languages and one for Inuktitut languages) Commissioners of Aboriginal Languages[4] including; promoting use and development of the Dene and Inuit languages throughout the Northwest Territories; overseeing implementation of functional bilingualism[5] throughout the Northwest Territories; and ensuring Aboriginal language legislation was enforced.

Recommendation 10
The Official Languages Act should retain the Office of the Languages Commissioner to ensure that the Act is enforced.

Advisory Board members are unanimous in believing the Office of the Languages Commissioner should have a primary role in promoting Aboriginal language revitalization including; awareness of the Act and the Office through community meetings; attending First Nations Assemblies; attending Language Community meetings; publishing newsletters; and website development. Further, the Office should be in a more visible high profile location, with offices that clearly reflect the cultural importance of the Official Languages.

Recommendation 11
The Official Languages Act should place a greater emphasis on role of the Office of the Languages Commissioner in actively promoting the Official Languages of the NWT.

Recommendation 12
Out of respect for each Official Language, the Office of the Languages Commissioner and the Languages Commissioner should be named in the Official Languages Act in at least one Official Aboriginal Language, in addition to English and French.

During the September 2000 consultation, many stakeholders interviewed indicated the Office of the Languages Commissioner should provide contemporary language research that assists

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[3] Task Force on Aboriginal Languages. *Report of the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages*. Yellowknife: 1986; p. 2.

[4] Task Force on Aboriginal Languages. *Report of the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages*. Yellowknife: 1986; p. 29.

[5] Functional bilingualism implies not only the ability to speak two languages, but to actually have opportunities to converse in each language on a regular basis.

language practitioners in program development and advocacy[6]. In order to provide a consistent picture of language growth or decline across official language groups, the Office of the Languages Commissioner should perform an evaluation function. Also, in order to identify critical success factors that provide a basis upon which to make well-informed decisions for language programs and policies, the Legislative Assembly should consider additional funding for the Bureau of Statistics, in consultation with the Office of the Languages Commissioner, to undertake socio-linguistic research every three to five years.

It is noteworthy that Section 29(1) of the Official Languages Act states that a committee established by the Legislative Assembly shall review the provisions and operation of the Official Languages Act after ten years. This very important clause of the Act ensures periodic reflection, assessment, and commitment to the preservation, development and enhancement of Aboriginal languages. This clause guarantees a built-in review system and must be retained in an amended Official Languages Act. Indeed, Canada's Official Language Commissioner, during her visits with the NWT Legislative Assembly and NWT Office of the Languages Commissioner, expressed regret that the federal Act did not contain a similar clause.

Recommendation 13
The provisions of the Official Languages Act requiring a review of Act every ten years should be retained.

However, expanding the Language Commissioner role to include evaluation would ensure on-going systematic evaluation between ten-year periods. Accordingly, the Office of the Languages Commissioner, in addition to current responsibilities, should have an expanded role in evaluation, and other tasks such as establishing an interpreter/translator certification process, and interpreter/translator registry and be provided with a budget that reflects expanded roles and increased responsibilities.

Recommendation 14
The Official Languages Act should expand the role of the Office of the Languages Commissioner to include a broad evaluation function with respect to implementation of the spirit and intent of the Act.

3.7 Independence of the Office of the Languages Commissioner

The Office of the Languages Commissioner is an entity unto itself. It's a constant reminder to the government that it has an Official Languages Act and that it must fulfill the spirit and

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[6] Although Official Language Communities have undertaken language surveys these surveys were conducted independently from one another. This is understandable and important considering each language community may have different objectives when conducting their surveys, but the information gathered fails to establish accurate and consistent baseline data across language communities. In order to establish accurate and consistent baseline data, Territory-wide surveys are essential for at least two reasons: surveys are a monitoring tool for language growth or decline, and more importantly, provides socio-linguistic information that leads to identification of critical success factors to be used as a basis upon which to make well-informed decisions for new language programs and policies.

intent of that Act. The Office keeps Official Aboriginal languages, as well as French, on the front burner.

The Office symbolizes the importance of languages to the people, to the communities and to the government, and it must be at the forefront of the government's priorities. Keeping languages alive is not only the communities' responsibility – it is this government's responsibility.

The Office of the Languages Commissioner is often a last resort for people when they require assistance or have complaints. The Office has the power and ability to investigate and resolve issues expeditiously. The Office responds to concerns or issues in a non-bureaucratic fashion, and people need to have that option available.

The degree of independence exercised by the Office of the Languages Commissioner is also a concern. Results from September 2000 Survey of the Office of the Languages Commissioner revealed that the public perceive the Office as a government institution, not as an arms-length body that can assist them in dealing with government.

In its role of monitoring GNWT department, board and agency Aboriginal language revitalization initiatives, and in responding to inquiries and complaints regarding Official language services, the Office of the Languages Commissioner must be independent so it can be impartial. This is consistent with the principles of operation of Ombudsman offices throughout Canada. Language Commissioner findings and decisions are based solely on examination and analysis of facts and law. In order to strengthen the credibility of the Office among the people and for the public to trust the results of Commissioner investigations, it must avoid even the appearance of serving the interests of the government and the departments, boards and agencies providing services.[7]

As part of this independence, the Office of the Languages Commissioner must also be free from day-to-day financial and administrative control by the Office of the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly. Legislative Assembly control is exercised instead through appointment, re-appointment and removal, and by the provision of annual reports and financial statements. Rigorous selection and other restraints imposed by law ensure the Office of the Languages Commissioner requires no further control.

Recommendation 15
In a revised Act, the independence of the Office of the Languages Commissioner should be clarified and enhanced, including separating its day-to-day financial and administrative operations from the Office of the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly.

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[7] Gottehrer DM, Hostina M. *Essential Characteristics of a Classical Ombudsman.*

4 A Bigger Vision

Our language is reflected in what our eyes gaze upon. Our language is reflected in the trees and grass, everything that is on the land. Learning our language allows us to freely reflect upon ourselves and upon this reflection we say we are whole. Therefore, we cannot go without our language because if you go without your language you do not know who you are and you do not know where you come from or your history.

Elizabeth Mackenzie speaking at the Office of the Languages Commissioner Advisory Board Meeting, October 2000

Reversal of language shift goes beyond increasing the number of speakers of an Aboriginal language as a *second* language. It involves increasing the number of people who speak that particular language as a *first* language[8] and restoring children's language. Functional bilingualism should be our goal.

While they still face many challenges, the French community in the Northwest Territories is demonstrating how a minority linguistic group can exercise its official language rights to improve its day-to-day use and to enhance the level of services to their members. The Federation Franco TeNOise has participated in the Language Commissioner's Advisory Board and provided support and advice to Aboriginal language representatives on how to revitalize their languages and how to ensure government is meeting its obligations.

In the *Official Languages Act*, we have some of the legislated basis needed to help revitalize NWT Aboriginal languages. In the work of the language communities, TLCs, NWT Literacy Council, DCI, and many other organizations that make contributions every day, we have the foundation of dedicated people necessary to achieve a reversal of language shift among Aboriginal languages in the NWT.

Survival of our languages is a critical component to our cultural identity. First Nation languages are a gift from our Ancestors. This is a crucial time in our history to preserve our endangered languages. At a time when many Aboriginal languages are facing extinction, the timing is crucial to place Aboriginal languages as a priority along side French and English.

Consistent with advice from Advisory Board members, changes to the Act, including the establishment of a Culture and Language Secretariat, increase and improvement of services

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[8] Drapeau L. *Perspectives On Aboriginal Language Conservation And Revitalization In Canada*. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Research Report. Ottawa: 1995.

to people, and expanded roles and responsibilities for the Office of the Languages Commissioner, would do much to improve the effectiveness of the *Official Languages Act* in support of NWT Aboriginal language revitalization.